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BEN JONSON AND THE CHARACTER-WRITERS.

The resemblance between the characters of Ben Jonson and those of the character-writers is in many particulars a quite obvious one. At a glance it may be seen in the list of the characters prefixed to "Every Man Out of His Humour." Here Jonson frankly adopts the "character" form. An examination of the other plays will reveal several points of resemblance, and suggest comparisons that may make clearer Jonson's dramatic method. It may be noted as significant that it is in the earlier plays that Jonson chiefly uses this "character" form. This form I shall hereafter call a "characterism," taking the word from Bishop Hall's "Characterisms of Virtues and Vices."

The source of the characterisms of Jonson and of the English character-writers is perhaps the same. The form was in fairly general use in England throughout the last half of the sixteenth century. Theophrastus was translated into Latin by Casaubon in 1592, and was reprinted in English in 1598. Although the influence of Theophrastus on Jonson is wholly an inference, that Jonson knew of him is certain. An indirect influence existed through Terence, who, according to La Bruyère, used Theophrastus as a model. Dr. E. C. Baldwin in an article on "Ben Jonson's Indebtedness to the Greek Character Sketch,"¹ makes very clear the fact that Jonson is indebted for much of "Epicœne" and for something of "Volpone" to a character sketch by Libanius on, "A Morose man who has married a talkative wife denounces himself." Dr. Baldwin appears to have confused the matter by implying an identity between this dramatic sketch and the characterisms of Theophrastus. The difference is a difference in kind, as the title of the sketch suggests. It is the difference that exists between the list prefixed to "Every Man Out of His Humour," and the quite different kind prefixed to "The New Inn."

Theophrastus is, of course, the source and model of the English character-writers. Hall testifies to this in the preface to

¹ *Modern Language Notes*, November, 1901.

his "Virtues and Vices" (1608). Overbury (1614) and Earle (1628) testify their great obligation to Hall. These very popular character-writers may have got suggestions from Jonson; but their form was from Theophrastus, and for the popularity that it quickly attained in the seventeenth century was able to stand by itself. Overbury went through eighteen editions before 1664.

In the introduction to "Every Man Out of His Humour" Jonson suggests his purpose in

I'll strip the ragged follies of the time
Naked as at their birth.

His purpose was to reform society through satire. The purpose of Theophrastus was to mend the manners of men, and much in the words of Jonson, Bishop Hall has in his preface: "Lo here then Virtue and Vice stript naked to open view."

This usual purpose of satire, Jonson and the character-writers carried out by much the same method. Theophrastus described a quality and then personified it, and made it vivid by recounting the actions and manners of the man dominated by it. Overbury says very definitely: "To square out a character by our English level, it is a picture (real or personal) quaintly drawn in various colors, all of them heightened by one shadowing. It is a quick and soft touch on many strings all shutting up in one musical close; it is wit's descant on any plain song." Jonson's familiar definition of "a Humour" from the Induction to "Every Man Out of His Humour" may be given here for ready comparison:

As when some peculiar quality
Doth so possess a man, that it doth draw
All his effects, his spirits and his powers,
In their confluxions, all to run one way,
This may be truly said to be a humour.

What Jonson and the character-writers did was to present certain types acting under the influence of a dominant characteristic. The man existed to exhibit the characteristic; his identity was lost in it.

For realizing its purpose satire has two methods: it exhibits

its victims by describing their follies, and it presents them in acts of folly. The dramatic is, of course, the method of action.

In his early plays Jonson was too much interested in getting all of the details into the picture to let the plot interfere with his character types. He used action as an essayist uses anecdote, or as La Bruyère, the character-writer did — merely to make more vivid the personification of the humour. As an example, chosen at random, take the exercises in the training of a gallant in "Cynthia's Revels,"² or the scene of Shift and his rapier in "Every Man Out of His Humour." The sort of action found here is not dramatic action, it is merely illustration of character-humour.

So his method in each detail presses home his purpose: he gives his *personæ* names indicative of their characters, he gives summaries of what they are like in introduction, he makes their fellow characters describe them, and he almost always has a character or two to act as a chorus³ to the peculiar manners of each one. The manners are reproduced in a pageant of figures brilliant and superficial; intellectual in concept rather than emotional, or sympathetic; undramatic in effect, and, it must be confessed, rather tedious to read connectedly. They are bright flashes of light on seventeenth century society, rather than character interpretations. So they produce precisely the effect that the pictures of Overbury and Earle produce.

Jonson's comedies have often been criticised for lack of character evolution; the criticism is really irrelevant as applied, at least, to the early comedies. In them the sort of character that can evolve is exceptional. What is there is manners and habits personified. If Jonson or Overbury were writing to-day, they would give vivid snap-shots of "a baseball fan," a "sport," "a street-car hog," or "a frenzied financier."

Just where the line should be drawn distinguishing characterisms and character is quite naturally not clear. An illustration or two may be in point. Lady Politick Would-be, in "Volpone," though not organically a part of the plot is a type of

² III, iii.

³ Macilente, Buffone, Crites, Horace, Truewit, Volpone.

what a character-writer would call "a talkative woman;" but she is presented as such dramatically. She does not suggest a characterism of "a talkative woman," because she has dramatic individuality. She is not summarized in a collection of descriptive phrases that at last might fail in making anything but an harmonious abstraction of her. The talk about Gratiano's talkativeness, in "The Merchant of Venice," is not undramatic. It is aptly worked into the action, and illustrated under its movement, and made vital by being both individual and universal. No one can regret this clever thumb-nail characterism sketched on the action of "As You Like It:" "Farewell Monsieur Traveller: Look you lisp and wear strange suits, disable all the benefits of your own country, be out of love with your own nativity, and almost chide God for making you the countenance you are, or I will scarce think you have swam in a gondola."⁴

With this Overbury's "An Affected Traveller" may be compared for likenesses no less than differences. What is incidental in Shakespeare is a large part of Jonson's main purpose. Bobadil, whom Jonson calls "a Paul's man," and Pantilius Tucce, whom he calls "a profane man" are truly dramatic characters. The difference between them and the types "a Paul's man" and "a profane man" of the character-writers is too wide to need pointing out; but it is no wider than the difference between Bobadil and most of Jonson's humour creations.

It is commonly said that satire is liable to two dangers: on the one side, in being typical, it is in danger of being too vague; on the other, in being the result of observation, it is in danger of becoming altogether personal and temporary. The figures in Jonson's comedies of "humour," where the "humour" idea has free play, fail of large interest for both of these reasons. In the character-writers and in Jonson the figures are at once too particular and too general. Shakespeare's traveller is not widely away from a present type, but Overbury's traveller, although drawn with great particularity and deftness of touch, has disappeared with his tooth-pick and St. Martin's. Jonson used the

⁴"As You Like It," III, v.

same particularity and the same obscuring multiplicity of detail. With such a method it is not surprising that he should write so personal a play as "The Poetaster," and that he should put into his plays pictures of his enemies that remain strictly individual. English character-writers did not in Jonson's day, make their characterisms personal hits. Although each "character" bristles with particularities of folly, the figures themselves are usually as colorless as ghosts. So it happens that the English "character" for its vagueness is on the side of the essay rather than on the side of the novel or of the drama; and we are not surprised to find in Overbury not only the character of "a prisoner," but the so-called "character of a prison," and in Earle, characters of "a tavern," and of "a bowle alley," and of "Paul's Walk," — or as we should now call it, an essay on Paul's Walk.

The character-writers are an accepted source of Sir Roger de Coverley. The character-writers were known to Addison, and it may be presumed not unfairly that they were a source. But in accepting the statement because the contrary cannot be proved, it seems clear that the vitality that is in Sir Roger is not a mere addition to the country-knight of Earle, any more than to the country-gull of Jonson with whom Sir Roger seems an impossible comparison. In the *Spectator* we have a complete transformation. Thackeray's snobs come nearer the "character" type than Sir Roger.

From the illustrations cited it will appear that in seeking subjects for analysis Jonson and the character-writers often used the same material. This is true. Their courtiers and their countrymen are entirely typical. Jonson labels his, for example, "Fastidious Brisk," and "Sordido;" the same types appear in the character books as "an affected courtier" and "a plain country fellow." The characterism of Sordido prefixed to "Every Man Out of His Humour," is as follows: "A wretched hobnailed chuff, whose recreation is reading of almanacs, and felicity foul weather. One that never prayed but for a lean dearth, and ever wept in a fat harvest."

Earle devotes two pages to a "plain country fellow" who is one "that manures his ground wel, but lets himself lie fallow

and untill'd. Hee has reason enough to doe his businesse, and not enough to be idle or melancholy. . . . His mind is not much distracted with objects; but if a good fat Cowe come in his way, he stands dumbe and astonisht, and though his haste bee never so great, will fixe here a halfe houre's contemplation. . . . Yet if hee (his landlord) give him leave, he is a good Christian to his power, (that is) comes to Church in his best clothes and sits there with his Neighbours, where he is capable only of two Prayers, for raine and faire weather. . . . Hee thinks nothing to be vices but Pride and ill-husbandry, from which he will gravely dissuade youth; and has some thrifty Hobnaylor Proverbes to Clout his discourse. . . ."

The people of Jonson's comedies are to a great extent the people of the character-writers. They make an unpleasant society. The characters of Jonson, Overbury and Earle associated in parallel columns will be found to be duplicating lists of gulls, upstart country knights, malcontents, smelts, hobnailed-chuffs, thread-bare sharks, usurers, hypocritical puritans, affected travellers, and parasites. A great deal of the presentation is vivid, even brilliant. As character dissection it has flashes of keen interest, but the character-writers and Jonson, in his early plays, present character not at all.

With the great plays of Jonson's middle period comparison with the character-writers fails, and for a significant reason. In "Volpone," "Epicœne," "The Alchemist," and "Bartholomew Fair," Jonson uses much the same figures from contemporary life that he used in his earlier comedies, but he subordinates them to his plot. In the process, the characters as characters lose nothing, they greatly gain. His feeling for them remains that of the analytic satirist; but there is genuine construction in the construction of the plot, and so in the relation of the characters to the plot. A comparison of the characters of Macilente and Morose as representations of men somewhat similar in disposition, will reveal a striking difference of method in relating these central figures of "Every Man Out of His Humour" and "Epicœne" to the other characters, and in relating the characteristics of these central figures to the plot. The difference is, roughly speaking, that between the characterism and the drama.

In his "New Inn" Jonson recurred to the method of giving a descriptive account of his characters. This is the character of Frank given there: "Frank, supposed to be a boy and the host's son, borrowed to be dressed for a lady, and set as a stale by Prudence to catch Beaufort or Latimer, proves to be Lætitia, sister to Frances, and Lord Frampul's younger daughter stolen by a beggar woman, shorn, put into boy's apparel, sold to the host and brought up by him as his son." And so for the others.

Here Jonson is thinking of the plot. Of characterization there is really none. This has no connection with the character-writing of Theophrastus or that of Overbury and Earle. In the evolution of his dramatic art Jonson's characters remain superficially the same, in reality they undergo a change that is fundamental.

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